

Central Periphery? Art, Culture and History of the Jazira (Northern Mesopotamia, 8th–15th centuries): Introduction

Martina Müller-Wiener – Lorenz Korn

The present volume contains part of the papers presented at a conference at the University of Bamberg in October–November 2012, under the title: *A Landscape of Its Own, or a Cultural Interspace? Art, Economies and Politics in the Medieval Jazira (Northern Mesopotamia)*. For the publication, this somewhat unwieldy formulation was modified for better readability. This notwithstanding, the following introductory remarks take the original title as a starting point for some general considerations on the cultural history of an area that has recently been thrown from the backstage of history to the forefront of political events.

While for historians of the Islamic Middle Ages the importance and the interest of the Jazira may not need to be underlined, it can be useful under the auspices of cultural history in general to clarify what the reward of a closer look at this region could be – an area that held a central geographical position in the lands of the Abbasid caliphate, yet never became a capital region; a region that was characterized by multi-partite structures particularly between the 10th and the 16th century, and that has been considered an interesting ground in cultural history for the manifold expressions of religious and ethnic diversity in the arts of this period; a region that has been marginalized from its integration into the Ottoman Empire to the 20th century, when it was divided between three states. In the recent past, Northern Mesopotamia has seen new developments and violent conflicts when, in the wake of the downfall of the Baathist government in Iraq and the eruption of civil war in Syria, established actors adopted new roles and new actors entered the stage. The appearance of the self-stylized “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” and the fighting with its neighbours have put Northern Mesopotamia in the focus of media attention worldwide. This new regime, which presently controls large portions of the Syrian and Iraqi territory of the Jazira, acts like an occupation force from outside, seemingly unconnected with the history and culture of the region. The destruction of cultural heritage that its forces have put on their agenda is, however, one of the greatest damages to historical material that Northern Mesopotamia has ever seen. The long-lasting conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish political movements adds to the political instability and seems to bring along more threats to the heritage of the region. Under these auspices, one may feel an even stronger incentive to broach the issue of the history of the Jazira, and to underline once more that the cultural riches of this region originated to a large extent from its religious and ethnic diversity.

However, as an introduction to a volume of scholarly intent, this would certainly not be enough, and it will be useful to review some of the considerations that have been guiding the organisation of the workshop and the choice of its topics, and to give an overview of contributions to the conference and some of the questions that were discussed. Naturally, these remarks cannot claim to be comprehensive, but should serve to clarify the circumstances under which the papers originated that have been gathered in the present volume.

*

There is no doubt that the geographic location and topography of the Jazira are decisive factors that have informed the region’s character and history. The one major characterising

feature of the area are the two rivers, Euphrates and Tigris, which have traditionally served as lifelines for the region. The names that various linguistic groups used to denote the area – Mesopotamia, al-Jazira, Bet Nahren etc. – indicate that peoples of the region through history were thoroughly aware of the significance of this specific geographical situation. They reflect one fundamental effect of the two river courses, namely, their forming natural boundaries. Between the rivers, a vast territory of roughly 150,000 square kilometres is enclosed, with geographical features that allow (or dictate) a characteristic set of economic activities. In addition, the rivers traditionally served as major connecting routes, as did the caravan trails leading along their shores and along other lines. They interlinked regional urban centres such as Mosul and ar-Raqa, Edessa/ar-Ruha and Amida/Diyarbakır with cities like Tabriz, Bagdad, Aleppo and Damascus, and further places on the long-distance routes connecting the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, the Persian Gulf and Western Asia. Finally, and not least, both rivers as well as their tributaries supplied part of the country with water for agricultural irrigation, and drove grain mills. The fertile valleys of Euphrates and Tigris and of their tributaries, the vast steppe lands around, the agricultural plains of the Northern Jazira, and the foothills of the Eastern Taurus in their combination formed a heterogeneous environment that was home to different ethnic and religious groups which exploited the natural resources in different ways. The principal sources of subsistence and income were agriculture, livestock, local crafts (mining in the north played a part since prehistoric times), and both local and long-distance trade. To a high degree, prosperity and welfare depended on a balance between the respective groups of nomadic pastoralists, rural population and inhabitants of cities that served as centres for craft and trade.

In terms of artistic creativity, the Jazira can be considered one of the richest and most varied regions of the medieval Near East. Artistic objects like metalwork (including coinage) and pottery, manuscript illustration, and works of architecture offer a fascinating wealth of forms and iconographic contents. Chronologically, a climax in this respect was reached between the 11th and 15th centuries, under the rule of comparatively ‘minor’ dynasties like the Zangids and Artuqids. The political division among different dynasties, who developed their own courts in a need for princely representation in places like Kharput (Elazığ), Mardin and Hisn Kayfa (Hasankeyf), seems to have sparked off a certain competition for prestige in artistic patronage. Although specific declarations for such a competition are lacking from written sources, it has been adduced as one reason for the astonishing efflorescence of artistic production in the medieval Jazira.

* *

During the past decades, the artistic production of the Jazira has been subject to several conferences and specialised studies. Depending on the changing focus of academic discourse in general and the respective interest of specific disciplines involved, these investigations have highlighted different aspects and adopted varying approaches. Thus, archaeologically oriented workshops held in 1994 at the Freie Universität Berlin and 2001 in Copenhagen focussed on questions of continuity and tradition, taking into consideration the time span between the Arsacid and Seleucid empires and the Early to Middle Islamic periods.¹ A *longue durée* perspective was also adopted by the organisers of the exhibition on the Jazira, presented in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin in 2006. In her introduction to the accompanying catalogue, Almut von Gladiss gives a brief summary of the history of the region, starting with refer-

1 The papers of the Berlin workshop were published by Bartl/Hauser 1996. The Copenhagen conference remained unpublished.

ences to Tell Halaf and Tell Brak and the period of urbanisation in the 4th millennium BCE.² As a contrast, specialised studies have usually adopted a more focussed approach. In 1986 Julian Raby published a collective volume on ‘The Art of Syria and the Jazira 1100–1250’. In the present context, this volume is of particular interest because the chronological focus is similar, and its articles deal with topics that are partly taken up by contributions in the present publication. An example can be seen in the discussion of links with neighbouring regions, from where the Jazira received impulses in politics, culture, and arts: In her introduction on the history of the Jazira, Carole Hillenbrand emphasises that during the time under consideration the political orientation of the Jazira ‘was still decisively to the East’.³ In a similar vein, Robert Hillenbrand in his comprehensive discussion of the ‘Raqa school’ of architecture comes to the conclusion that ‘enough has been said to show that the buildings in the Raqa area are to a remarkable extent subject to eastern influences’.⁴ Given the multi-partite structure of the Jazira during the relevant period, this statement invites discussion to what degree it can be transferred to other places in the Jazira. Based on the earlier works of Max van Berchem and Albert Gabriel, Michael Meinecke’s observations on stylistic influences in the architecture of Hasankeyf addressed similar topics, but came to different conclusions as far as the external links were concerned.⁵ Another collective volume that originated from a specialized conference was organized by Deniz Beyazit.⁶ While the title puts the weight on Anatolia instead of the Jazira, a large part of the contributions deals with the region south of the Taurus Mountains. Thus, the volume underlines the connection between Northern Mesopotamia and the northern adjacent regions and deals with the different factors that shaped this region from within and without, including relations with Mosul, Western Iran, the Black Sea and Caucasus regions.

Another aspect of the artistic creativity of the Jazira that has inspired controversial debates is the ‘revival’ or ‘survival’ of classical (Roman provincial and Byzantine) elements, which is not particular to the Jazira, but has also been observed in Syria and, to a lesser extent, other regions of the Islamic World. However, the frequent use or re-use of antique forms and motifs has also been interpreted as indicative of cultural diversity, because it can be taken either as evidence for diverse traditions, or for an openness to adopt elements from the pre-Islamic past. A similar view is also taken by a number of studies devoted to the interpretation of the rich imagery on objects of art, particularly on pieces of metalwork and enamelled glass that frequently include references to Christian themes. The relevant studies, starting with Eva Baer’s seminal volume on ‘Ayyubid Metalwork with Christian images’ and continuing with Steppan’s volume on the Artuqid bowl, Estelle Whelan’s erudite study on political iconography, and Eva Hoffman’s article on ‘Christian Islamic encounters’⁷ reveal successive stages of a process of conceptualization. Whereas the earlier studies highlight the heterogeneous character of the artistic production of Northern Mesopotamia and use the biological metaphor of ‘hybridity’ to describe this scenario, recent studies developed another set of concepts and terminology. The metaphor of hybridity, which presupposes ‘pure’ original cultures, is replaced by alternative concepts. Instead, the visual vocabulary of the imagery, their function

2 Von Gladiss 2006.

3 C. Hillenbrand 1986, 17.

4 R. Hillenbrand 1986, 27.

5 Van Berchem 1910; Gabriel 1940; Meinecke 1996, pp. 55–87.

6 Beyazit 2012.

7 Baer 1989; Steppan 1995; Hoffman 2004; Whelan 2006.

and patronage are interpreted as indicators of cultural diversity and multi-layered identities. This current interest in questions of identity has recently resulted in still another, more theoretically based study investigating the development of communal identities and the possible role of art in developing and maintaining a communal identity with special reference to Syrian Orthodox art.⁸

This brief glance on recent scholarship shows that there is a tradition of highlighting the Jazira as one of the cultural ‘melting pots’ of the Middle Ages in the Near East, and that iconographic approaches have dominated the discussion of its artistic development. Moreover, an overview of relevant books and articles will also indicate that a focus of research has been lying on the 12th–13th centuries. As a contrast, architecture and material culture of early Islamic Northern Mesopotamia (and its relation with later developments) have received comparatively little attention, and the same could be said for the later periods, in which the Jazira came under Ottoman rule. Research on the cultural history of the great empires both of the caliphate and the Ottomans has tended to leave Northern Mesopotamia aside, probably for its seemingly peripheral position. In this connection, it may be remarked that these periods witnessed important developments concerning the aspect of religious diversity; the Sabians of Harran should be mentioned for the early period, and the flourishing of Yezidi cult for the Ottoman period. While these elements are well-known in general, it can be said that the various factors contributing to the cultural diversity of the Jazira, the political, economic and social conditions, have hardly been examined in detail.⁹

Trans-disciplinary attempts to integrate research on the economic and political history as well as the art history of the Jazira have remained comparatively rare. This contrasts with the larger picture of scholarly activities in the field of medieval cultural history and art history, in which the integration of manifold influences to multi-cultural units have recently met with great attention. The dynamics of trans-cultural relations, particularly across the Mediterranean, but also across other boundaries, have increasingly been the object of interdisciplinary studies.¹⁰ In this context, the Jazira, with its intricate web of different peoples, languages, religions, and economies offers itself as an area of study for the interplay between different cultural factors.

* * *

Against this backdrop the goals of the workshop were comprehensive and ambitious. One objective was the broadening of the chronological horizon, without necessarily adopting a ‘continuity’ approach. The consideration of the earlier periods, it was hoped, would automatically contribute to a better understanding of the shifting orientations of the region and its ever-changing integration into larger economic, political and cultural systems. Another objective of the workshop aimed at theoretical and methodological consideration. The speakers were invited to step back and to reflect on the admittedly controversial question whether the Jazira is ‘a cultural landscape of its own’ or rather a space in between, a ‘cultural inter-space’. The disputed concept of landscape was introduced deliberately, despite the criticism

⁸ Snelders 2010.

⁹ Major exceptions for the period before the 12th century are Heidemann 2002 and Robinson 2000.

¹⁰ At a national level this interest has been promoted and supported by large scale research programmes such as the DFG priority programme 1172 ‘Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter’, although this includes no specialists of Islamic art and archaeology. Another large-scale research project focussing on questions of multicultural societies ‘Art, Space and Mobility in the Early Ages of Globalization: The Mediterranean, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent (McCAIS) 400–1650’ is based at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence.

that it has earned, particularly from the side of European art history where the term of the *Kunstlandschaft* is fraught with conceptual problems.¹¹ However, from the archaeological perspective the concept of landscape has become a major instrument for purposes of studying human-environmental relations and regional analysis.¹² Considering the Jazira in terms of cultural landscapes entails the notion that it is a distinct geographical area that represents the combined work of nature and of human activities. It is man-made in as much as it is fashioned from a natural landscape by one or more cultural groups, if we follow Carl Sauer's classical definition of 'cultural landscape'. The concept of the Jazira as a real space and a distinct geographical area may, however, be contrasted or complemented by concepts focussing on the social aspects of the creation of space through its perception, usage and appropriation. Finally, the other keyword introduced in the title of the workshop was 'cultural interspace'. It refers to the still ongoing discussion about processes of cultural transfer. By now there is broad agreement that transfer should not be considered as a bilateral process but rather in terms of networks that can operate multi-directional. Transfer occurs on a material level, by objects being transferred, or on an immaterial level, by the transfer of knowledge, technology or ideas. That is to say that transfer entails a cultural dimension. It is along these lines that the major importance of the Jazira as a zone of contact, mobility, communication and circulation can be understood. The Jazira is, what Rachel Mairs aptly termed 'a place in between'¹³. A place in between the cultural and political spheres of Iran, Anatolia, Syria and Iraq, and a corridor that provided routes on which merchants, commodities, knowledge and ideas travelled.

This issue was discussed in the first panel of the conference, devoted to 'Traffic routes, mobility and interaction'. Here, the first two contributions dealt with questions of the political and economic history of Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Jazira. Michaela Konrad presented her paper '*The Jazira during the Roman Period: Space of cultural and political interaction*', whereas Hugh Kennedy (London) discussed '*The Jazira and Iraq from Umayyad to 'Uqaylid Times: An economic reappraisal*'. These two were complemented by Martina Müller-Wiener's (Berlin) contribution addressing '*Relations between Northern Syria, the Jazira and Iraq in the 8th and 9th Century: The ceramic evidence*'. Whereas this investigation uses material evidence, i.e. pottery, to consider the cultural orientation of the early Islamic Jazira, the following contribution by Sonja Brentjes tackled the issue from the side of intellectual history, with the question: '*The Presence of Mathematical Science in the Jazira – ephemeral or of some greater relevance locally and at times even for neighboring regions?*' Another aspect was entered into the discussion by Ruba Kanaan. In her paper on '*Craftsmen, Traders, and Markets in the Jazira: The socio-legal perspective*', she focused on evidence from medieval compendia of contract law and artists signatures, in order to reassess the relation between artists producing high quality metalwork and their patrons. Finally, Thomas Sinclair introduced the micro-regional perspective. Under the title '*Amid and Mardin as a Node of Routes in the 12th and 13th Century*' he developed the idea that the district's prosperity in the second half of the Middle Ages was owed not just to a single line of commercial movement which passed through it, but also to its being a district where several commercial avenues met.

The subsequent discussion focused on the orientation of the Jazira as a contact zone in the cultural geography of pre-Islamic and Islamic times, its dependence on political constella-

11 The development of the *Kunstlandschaft* terminology and the historical burden connected with it have been elucidated by Engel 2009.

12 Crumley/Marquardt 1990.

13 Mairs 2011.

tions and resulting social and economic factors. In this context it was pointed out that despite the intense connections with Syria and other neighbouring regions, the orientation of the Jazira towards Iraq should probably be considered the strongest and long-lasting factor that influenced its cultural development.

The second panel addressed political and social conditions of the production and use of material culture and architecture. Five papers presented results from current research from the fields of Islamic studies, medieval history and history of Eastern Christianity. Carole Hillenbrand gave an insight into the manifestations and mechanisms of particularistic systems of rule with a paper on *'The Life and Times of Najm al-Din Alpi'*. The historical background of Muslim-Christian coexistence was addressed by Christian Lange (Bamberg), talking on *'The Impact of the Crusades on Eastern Christianity. Some observations'*, and by Dorothea Weltecke with a paper on *'Christians in Cities of the Jazira'*. As a contrast, Şevket Küçük Hüseyin's paper *'Messianist Expectations Among Anatolian Turkmens – were there Syriac influences?'* addressed cross-cultural and interfaith relations, starting from the example of the Turkmen Baba'î revolt which occurred in 637–8/1239–40 in the part of the region that formerly separated and connected the Muslim and Byzantine spheres. Lutz Ilisch took up the issue of the Turkmens and their role in the historical development of the area with his contribution on *'The Aq Quyunlu Confederation: A successor state of the Artuqid principalities?'* The creative energy resulting from the encounter of Christian and Muslim population, rulers and religious institutions was addressed by Elif Keser-Kayaalp. Her contribution on the *'Significance of Syrian Orthodox Architectural Heritage in the Development of the Architectural Tradition of the Medieval Jazira'* revisited the survival-revival debate about the classicisms in the architectural sculpture of Medieval Jazira and introduced a group of Syrian Orthodox churches and monasteries in the Tur Abdin which can be dated to the 8th century and have been neglected in this debate. Finally, Deniz Beyazit, with her *'Dolce Vita at the Artuqid Court in Mardin and Diyar Bakr'*, presented several well preserved köşks and palaces of remarkable artistic quality dating from the 14th to the early 15th century in the city of Mardin and its environs, arguing that Artuqid Mardin was an artistic and cultural production centre with a considerable trans-regional impact.

The third panel opened with a contribution by Martin Gussone, *'Potentials and Legends – Early explorers and remote sensing methods to Islamic find sites in north-eastern Syria and Mesopotamia'*. Using some sites as an example, he demonstrated that reports of early explorers such as Max von Oppenheim, Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld, Alois Musil and Gertrude Bell were not immune against the pitfalls of myth-creation. After critical scrutiny, however, the evaluation of reports by early explorers can be reasonably combined with remote sensing methods to confirm results of archaeological investigations on the ground and to identify archaeological sites. Stefan Heidemann with his paper *'Classical Revival – Memories of the Past'* revisited the revival-survival debate. Arguing that references to classicizing style are absent from contemporary literature, and hardly any expressions of historical consciousness that implied deeper connections with classical antiquity can be found, he explored other possible explanations pointing towards the economic blossoming, which allowed for a revitalisation of regional classicizing traditions in the mid-12th century. Oya Pancaroğlu in her paper on *'Artuqid Identity in the Late Twelfth Century: A comparative perspective'* likewise addressed the question of identity, inherent in the discussion of the Classical revival, but on the example of the titlature of the Artuqid princes of Harput.

The last panel of the conference was devoted to case studies highlighting or illustrating certain aspects of the central questions of the workshop: is it possible to identify an independent regional artistic identity of the Jazira, and how does it relate – in terms of chronology and regional developments – to the artistic cultures of adjacent spheres? The chronological range and the thematic approaches of the respective contributions were broad. Ulrike Siegel's *Frühabbasidische Empfangsräume in Nordmesopotamien. Raumkonzeptionen als Ausdrucksträger tradierter Norm und individueller Lösung* presented a typology of early Abbasid audience halls and discussed their relation with Syrian and Iraqi architectural traditions. Robert Hillenbrand took up the issue of representative frontispieces, with *The Frontispiece Problem in the Kitab al-Aghani of 1217–1219* as a splendid example. Claus-Peter Haase (Berlin) discussed *Possible and Impossible Artistic Contacts Between Muslim and Christian Communities: Examples from book illuminations and architectural ornaments in the Jazira*. Starting with some critical notes on the difficulties and pitfalls of labelling ornaments as 'Islamic' he continued with the analysis of geometric ornaments in a Syriac gospel, contrasting it with the way in which architectural ornament could have served to distinguish Christian and Islamic buildings in Mardin and Midyat. The problem of labelling and attributing provenances was also taken up by Joachim Gierlich, *Der Berliner Drachenklopfer im (wissenschafts-)historischen Kontext*, albeit with a different focus. His meticulous investigation of the acquisition history of the dragon-shaped door-knocker in the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art revealed surprising results and insight into the intricacies of late-19th century art markets. Finally, Lorenz Korn presented *Fashions in the Art of the Jazira and Neighbouring Regions (9th–13th cent.): The case of Amid (Diyarbakır)*, in which the development of Kufic script in Abbasid caliphal inscriptions from Diyar Bakr – probably very much influenced from the capital region in Iraq – was confronted with the architecture of the small Artuqid palace excavated in Diyarbakır, in which connections with Syria and Anatolia appear much closer, while the larger domed building nearby represents a challenge of its own in attribution and interpretation, once more indicating on what level of creativity the architects of the medieval Jazira were operating.

Of the papers that were presented at the conference, not all were turned into articles for the present book. On the other hand, one article is included that could not be presented during the conference. For Annette Hagedorn, the art of Mosul had remained a major topic of research since her dissertation on the Blacas ewer, and she would have loved to discuss the role of Mosul in artistic production of the late 13th century with other participants of the conference. Due to her illness, this was not possible. With her article, the publication of this volume also goes along with the memory of Annette Hagedorn as a person who aimed at establishing art history as a fully recognized discipline in Islamic Oriental Studies.

The medieval Jazira has still to offer a multitude of topics for research. As a crossroads in which artistic currents from different regions met, it is unique in the history of the Near East, and at the same time, as a cultural landscape in which different traditions were worked into a dense fabric of material expressions, it is also characteristic of the history of this larger region. The illuminations of the Codex Syriacus 559 in the Vatican Library together with the frontispieces of the Kitab al-Aghani, both of them subject matters of articles in the present volume, demonstrate to what degree the different religious groups in the Jazira shared a formal language in expressions of their faith and culture. There will certainly be more to be discovered in and about this region that can throw light on its history and culture.